PHILOSOPHICALLY SPEAKING | The Morality of Atheism

BY PHIL ZUCKERMAN • 14 JUNE 2022

According to the latest General Social Survey results—and for the first time in such survey history—the percentage of Americans who are absolutely convinced of God's existence has fallen below 50%. And just last year, Gallup found that church membership in the US—also for the first time–has fallen below 50%.

Many will find such news worrisome, given the widespread prejudice that nonreligious people are, at root, immoral. After all, if you don't believe in God, how can you be moral? What do you even base your morality on? The likes of Stalin, Pol Pot, and Mao certainly didn't help much on this front: as bloody dictators who caused unimaginable misery and destruction—and were explicitly atheistic–their carnage only deepened atheism's linkage with immorality in many people's minds.

And yet, contrary to the widespread stereotype of atheists as immoral, the surprising reality today is that atheists and agnostics actually exhibit very compassionate, ethical, altruistic, and humane proclivities. Indeed, if anything characterizes the personal orientation of contemporary secular people, aside from their godlessness, it is their care and concern for the well-being of others—care and concern that is often stronger and more pronounced than that of religious people.

Consider Americans' response to COVID-19. As the highly contagious pandemic raged, adhering to mandated health directives such as avoiding public gatherings, wearing masks, and getting vaccinated was not only a matter of self-care but communal care, as doing so protected others from illness too. While the majority of Americans–both religious and secular—were willing to take these necessary steps to fight the virus, it was the most fervently faithful among us who were the most resistant, while it was the most staunchly secular among us who were the most amenable. For example, it was the strongly religious who fought the hardest against the bans on large public gatherings, which resulted in increased sickness and death. Furthermore, vaccination rates among atheists, agnostics, and humanists were significantly higher than among the religious; one study from 2021 found that, while over ninety percent of atheists had gotten vaccinated, only sixty-six percent of Protestants had.

Regarding another public health scourge, gun violence, the secular again lean more towards the safe and ethical end of the spectrum than their religious peers. Thus, despite Christianity's ethos of nonviolence, national data shows that secular Americans are significantly less likely to own guns and are more likely to favor stricter gun control laws than the religious—especially white Evangelicals.

When it comes to compassion and sympathy for racial minorities, especially African Americans, the secular community again stands out. Numerous studies have found that atheists and agnostics exhibit markedly lower levels of racism than their religious peers, are the least likely of all religious groups to blame African Americans for the suffering they endure, and are far more supportive of social justice/civil rights movements than religious people. That is, despite the apparent religious emphasis on caring for others, sympathy for racial minorities is actually much more pronounced among white Americans who are *not* religiously active than among those who are.

Additionally, on the compassion and sympathy front, Americans' views on undocumented immigrants are illustrative. Biblical scriptures are strongly supportive of caring for the stranger in one's land, and the very circumstances of the birth of Jesus entail refugees needing shelter, only to be told there is "no room at the inn." However, it is actually atheists and agnostics today who exhibit the greatest degrees of compassion for non-citizens in our midst; while sixty-five percent of white Evangelicals, fifty-two percent of white Catholics, and nearly forty-six percent of Mormons favor deporting all undocumented immigrants, only around twenty-five percent of atheists and agnostics hold to such an unmerciful position.

Speaking of mercy, secular Americans stand out morally on the anti-death penalty front, as well. A recent Pew study found that atheists oppose the death penalty just about as strongly as Protestant Christians favor it. On many other leading ethical issues of the day–from wanting to effectively address the threats of climate change to supporting affordable healthcare for all, from supporting women's rights to bodily autonomy to believing women's claims of sexual assault, and from opposing child abuse to supporting the rights of non-human animals, secular Americans do not exhibit the immoral, unethical, corrupt orientation many assume. Quite the opposite.

What undergirds the relatively high moral acumen of atheists?

Rather than obedience to divine authority and the following of religious rules, godless people base their morality on empathy and compassion: treating others the way they themselves would want to be treated and seeking, when possible, to reduce the suffering of others. Such ethical proclivities are naturally grounded in our evolved histories as social primates, our ongoing socialization and enculturation, our ability to conscientiously reflect on the consequences of our actions, and our personal experiences as we live and interact with others. Additionally, because atheists don't believe in a life after death, they are compelled to see fairness and justice enacted here, in this world.

Atheists and agnostics are not the immoral monsters many assume them to be. As religiosity continues to weaken, and faith in God continues to decline, the result will not be moral mayhem or ethical chaos. Rather, care and concern for others will continue to exist, and maybe even increase.

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